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SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



NATURAL WONDER

Two architects design their own private oasis
just minutes from downtown San Diego.

WRITTEN BY PAIGE PORTER FISCHER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY UNDINE PRÖHL



Architecture, Interior Design and Landscape Architecture: Taal Safdie and Ricardo Rabines, Safdie Rabines Architects
Home Builder: David Kramer, Oakhurst Builders, Inc.



The entry to the home that architects Taal Safdie and Ricardo Rabines designed for themselves in San Diego opens to a stairwell that runs past a wall of glass from Western Window Systems. “We made this glass stair tower but used reeded glass, so you see color, but you can’t see figures,” Safdie explains. “Sunlight can filter in, but you can get the privacy you want.”

Architects Taal Safdie and Ricardo Rabines shared a common goal when envisioning their Goldfinch Canyon house together. “We wanted it to feel as though we were living outside, like we were truly connected to the canyon and nature,” says Safdie. Known for their sustainable, site-specific designs, the husband-and-wife duo had just the right skill set to make that happen.

“This is a dense, urban neighborhood, just three minutes from downtown San Diego, and the houses are close together,” says Safdie, noting that they’re 8 feet apart. “We actually lived on this block before we bought this lot, and we wanted to stay. We love it for the diversity, the mix of single-family and multi-family homes here, and the proximity to restaurants and other amenities.”

Sited on a narrow but deep lot measuring 50 by 200 feet, they designed a home that both honors the natural landscape and embraces it—quite literally. “We had depth restrictions because canyon lands are considered sensitive lands,” says Safdie. “We had to get creative to win the space we desired and the seclusion we craved. Our design process was all about making sure we didn’t experience the neighbors directly. That meant orienting the views and the energy of the house toward both the canyon and toward the street, where we have a private courtyard.”

To that end, they fashioned a large, open first floor with a sight line that runs through the house toward the outdoor living spaces, which spill over the canyon. The back of the house features a glass wall, with large glass doors that stack on either side of the living and dining spaces, allowing a completely seamless transition between the interior and exterior. “We call this our ‘balcony house’ because we wanted to feel like we were always on a balcony outside,” says Rabines. “The house flows onto the patio, the patio flows onto the terrace, and the terrace onto the canyon,” he says. “It gives this illusion that the house keeps on going.”

Privacy is not an illusion, however. The duo, who recruited general contractor David Kramer to build the house, achieved a secluded feeling inside thanks in large part to the thoughtful landscape design plan they created along with the architecture itself. “Our architectural plan included the landscape design because we wanted the foliage to feel like an extension of the house,” says Safdie. “We needed the plants to help with privacy, but we also wanted them around because we love gardening. We love being outdoors as much as possible. So, the plants come right up to the edge of the house, and if the doors are open, you can reach out and touch them. It’s the way we like to live.”

Because they also wanted to bathe the entire house in natural light, the couple designed a reeded glass wall that envelops the entrance and stairwell, allowing light to pour into the home, but blurring images outside. The reeded glass repeats in the kitchen, on the island cabinet fronts. “Repetition of materials is a theme in our work,” says Safdie. “That’s why we chose the same backdrop for everything—this very simple and warm ash wood that carries through on the floors, ceilings and paneling.” Only upstairs does the wood vary, and only on the ceilings, where the architects used maple: similar in tone and warmth, but more durable for the ceilings that extend outside over the balcony.

Atop this clean canvas of wood, Safdie and Rabines invited in plenty of saturated shades to the contemporary spaces. “We have always been drawn to warm colors, and we were purposeful about the backdrop so that we could use plenty of them,” says Safdie. The couple’s favorite hues aren’t limited to textiles and upholstery but also welcomed by way of jewel-like light fixtures, original art in vibrant shades and a rainbow’s worth of decorative glass.

“When it’s daylight, we’re often looking through the house to the colorful landscape outside,” says Rabines. “But when it’s dark outside, our house lights up, and the colors of the flowers are all there, warming the inside. It is quite inviting by day or by night.” ■



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—TAAL SAFDIE

Safdie and Rabines re-used many pieces from their former residence, such as the dining area's chairs, which were reupholstered, and the pendants hanging above. Cabinetmaker Edgar Adams fabricated the dining table, which the couple designed. In the adjacent living area, a Roche Bobois sofa faces a 12-foot-wide oil painting by Safdie's sister, artist Carmelle Safdie.



Right: Khatmia limestone from Turkey covers the kitchen floors. Honed Palomino granite from Brazilian Exotic Granite tops the counters and backsplash, adding another layer of pattern and richness to the space.

Opposite: An outdoor sectional from Teak Warehouse transforms a platform in the garden into an open-air living room. "If you live on a canyon, even if your neighbors are close by—when you orient yourself toward the canyon, it feels like you're living in the country," says Safdie.





A clerestory window brings light into the main bedroom. Hanging against the ash veneer wall paneling is a painting by Sylvia Safdie, Safdie's aunt. The architects positioned the custom platform bed to take in the view and had the chaise, a vintage find, recovered. Underfoot is LM Flooring's Kendall North American maple.